John Buchanan: "On Jeremiah Wright"
A statement made during morning worship
at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
on Sunday, March 30, 2008

I want to take a moment and think together about the continuing controversy surrounding Trinity United Church of Christ; its former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, a friend of mine; and its new pastor, Otis Moss III, also a friend and a new board member of the *Christian Century*.

Trinity Church has been in the news every day for the past two weeks because one of its members is Senator Barack Obama. Jeremiah Wright was pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side for thirty-six years. During his ministry, the congregation grew to 8,000 members, the largest in the United Church of Christ. More importantly, the church, under Wright's leadership, reached out to the community with mission programs, education, social services, AIDS education and treatment, and health care. Trinity Church shares with us a worldview and commitment to mission in the world. When you drive north on Stony Island Avenue, from the South Side toward downtown, you pass by a large community health center sponsored by Trinity United Church of Christ. One way to evaluate and measure a ministry is by the mission it generates and the organization that supports and enables it. Among Chicago churches and Chicago clergy of all denominations, Jeremiah Wright's ministry is widely admired as a model of what a public church can and ought to be, and he, himself, is widely respected.

I wish he had made his point without saying "God damn America," but not for a moment do I wish he had been less prophetic. In fact, the great biblical prophets did and said outrageous, controversial things, which consistently got them in trouble and occasionally in jail. One thinks of Jeremiah, for instance, or Amos and the Amaziah affair. I wish Jeremiah Wright had not said "The chickens are coming home to roost" about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, even though he was referring to a speech made by Edward Peck, former Ambassador to Iraq and President Reagan's Terrorism Task Force Deputy Director. Wright was paraphrasing Ambassador Peck, who went on to list America's domestic and foreign policy decisions that had put the nation in peril. I wish he hadn't suggested that the government were responsible for AIDS. But then again, the government never infected numbers of my race with a deadly syphilis virus as an experiment not so very long ago.

Senator Obama's critics wonder how the senator could have remained in Wright's congregation and under his leadership for twenty years. The answer is that Wright didn't say "God damn America" every Sunday. In fact,

Wright's sermons were biblically based, relevant, literate, and eloquent, week after week. When the preachers of the land decide whose sermons and lectures or preaching they want to hear, Jeremiah Wright's are near the top of the list.

I'm distressed that the *Chicago Tribune* continues to regard Jeremiah Wright's sermons as front-page news and led us yesterday to, of all things, a report on his retirement home.

I'm distressed by white people, out of a very different religious, cultural, racial, theological/ecclesiastical experience, presuming to judge African American faith practices and religious expression and preaching.

Most of all I deplore CNN's and other networks' decisions to play a few seconds out of thirty-six years of preaching, several-sentences-long sound bites over and over again. It's no wonder people who don't know a thing about Trinity Church or Jeremiah Wright come to wrong conclusions. I'm not the only preacher in the land who knows how vulnerable any one of us is should ill-chosen words lifted out of a sermon be played and replayed, over and over again as Wright's were.

So let's all settle down and put the whole matter of Jeremiah Wright and Trinity Church and Barack Obama's membership into the context of the 365-days-a-year life of an extraordinary and faithful Christian congregation.

Katharine Moon, a professor of political science at Wellesley, a Korean American, in a March 25, 2008, *Chicago Tribune* editorial remembered the church in which she was nurtured:

> Churches, synagogues, mosques, prayer meetings are . . . communities of mutual help, support, and practical guidance. As social scientists know, they are instrumental to building and maintaining social capital. For new immigrants, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, they serve a particular purpose. Often, the immigrant or ethnic church is the one public place where a common language, food, and humor particular to one's cultural heritage can be shared. . . . It is through the congregation that we ask for help—to look after our children or elderly parents. . . . Often it is the people in the worship hall who . . . help us paint our houses and visit us in hospitals. . . . A house of worship is much more than a pastor.

Sensible, valuable words about pastors and congregations, one of which happens to count among its members a candidate for president and his family.

And I ask you to join me in reaching out in friendship to our brothers and sisters at Trinity United Church of Christ and to pray for them, their former pastor, and their new pastor:

Lord of the church in all its magnificent expression, the body of Christ in all the world, we pray for our neighbors, our brothers and sisters of the Trinity United Church of Christ, with whom we share a passion for justice and for mission and reconciliation across all the barriers that divide.

Continue to bless them by your own Spirit.

We pray for their newly retired pastor, their pastor for thirty-six years, Jeremiah Wright. We thank you for his strong and faithful ministry, his outspoken advocacy for justice, his passion for your kingdom. Bless him and keep him in these difficult days.

And we pray for Trinity's new pastor, Otis Moss III. Bless and keep him and his family. Give him the gifts he needs to serve you and his people with love and commitment, patience and good humor.

And bless us, O God, as we seek to be your faithful church here in this place.

Startle us again with the news of a risen Lord, of hope and love, not defeated by death, but alive and vigorous among us.

Amen.

DOUBT
March 30, 2008

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 16
1 Peter 1:3–8
John 20: 19–29

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."
John 20:29 (NRSV)

All language about the future, as any economist or politician will tell you,
is simply a set of sign posts pointing into a fog. We see through a glass darkly,
says Saint Paul, as he peers toward what lies ahead. . . . All our language
about the future of the world and ourselves consists of complex pictures
that may or may not correspond very well to the ultimate reality. . . .
Suppose someone came forward out of the fog to meet us?
That, of course, is the central though often ignored Christian belief. . . .
Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world
by coming forward from the future into the present.

N.T. Wright
Surprised by Hope

Garrison Keillor's column in the *Tribune* caught my eye: "A Pagan's Thoughts at Eastertide." There must be a sermon in there somewhere, I thought. There was. The column is a candid and poignant confession that Keillor struggles with faith issues, particularly at Easter:

> I came to church as a pagan this year, though wearing a Christian suit and white shirt, and sat in a pew with my sandy-haired, gap-toothed daughter whom I would like to see grow up in the love of the Lord, and there I was, a skeptic.

"Holy Week," Keillor wrote, "is a good time to face up to the question: Do we really believe in that story or do we just like to hang out with nice people and listen to organ music?"

Keillor's spiritual crisis was precipitated by a reading of the four Gospels straight through and then a book about how the Bible came to be the Bible,

how which books were chosen to be included in the canon and who did the choosing. “Our book” unlike the Ten Commandments, or the Book of Mormon, or the Koran, he observes, was not handed down from on high: “Our book was hammered out through a long, contentious political process like the tax code, and that’s something you don’t care to know more about.”

So he sat in a pew with his daughter during Holy Week feeling miserable but also understanding that if you doubt, you’re not alone. You’re in good company. Jesus himself doubted—when in the garden, he asked God to rescue him, and from the cross, he cried out, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” The disciples themselves must have doubted, must have been less than absolutely certain when one betrayed him, another denied him, and they all fled, abandoning him.

Keillor went on to reflect that skepticism perhaps ought not to be repressed: “It is an antidote to smugness and self-righteousness.” And there’s plenty of that in the current purveyors of religion. “Jesus,” Keillor correctly observed, “was rougher on the self-righteous than he was on adulterers and prostitutes.”

The column concluded, “So I will sit in the doubter’s chair for a while and see what is to be learned there.”

My sense is that Garrison Keillor is not alone sitting in the doubter’s chair—or pew; that he’s a brilliant journalist not only because he can chuckle at his own foibles and humanness and invite us to do the same, but also because he expresses what a lot of us think.

Do we really believe this story, or do we just like to hang out with nice people and listen to organ music?

There is someone in the story itself who raises the issue. His name is Thomas, sometimes referred to as Doubting Thomas, which is not altogether fair or accurate.

After Jesus was crucified, his friends, understandably, fled and hid somewhere in Jerusalem, in a room, behind a locked door. Roman justice, after all, had been swift, fairly capricious, and brutal. They all might become its next victims. So they’re hiding in that room on the first day of the week. They’re not only afraid; they must have been devastated. Their friend, who had promised them that the kingdom of God was coming on earth, the one they were coming to believe might be God’s own Son, was dead: weak, vulnerable, helpless in face of Rome’s brutal power. He was dead and so was the dream, the hope.

Some of the women had gone to the tomb early that morning and returned babbling something about the tomb being empty. They dismissed it as an "idle tale," one of the accounts tells us. Peter himself had gone to see and confirmed the report. But Peter's credibility was at an all-time low. Peter, everyone knew, was given to hyperbole and exaggeration: "I'll die before I deny you," he had boasted publicly, just a few hours before he denied even knowing Jesus—three times.

And then, on the evening of that Easter day, something happened in that room. He was there. They sensed his presence. They experienced his presence. Again the account is spare, lean. There is no explanation, no argument. Just an experience that transformed a group of devastated, grieving men and women into disciples of a living God.

But one of them was not there. Can you imagine the scene when he returns?

> "Thomas, Thomas. You won't believe it. He was here: He is not dead. He is risen."
>
> "You're right. I don't believe you."
>
> "But, Thomas, it happened."
>
> "I'll believe it when I see it, when I put my fingers in the nail holes in his hands."

That sounds pretty familiar actually. In fact, I've always regarded Thomas, with his insistence on empirical evidence, seeing and touching, as the patron saint of modern men and women. That's how we've learned to think.

British scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright has written a fine new book on the resurrection, *Surprised by Hope*, in which he examines the difficult but all-important question of how we know what we know. For the past 200 years, since the Enlightenment, Western civilization has operated by an intellectual system that has problems with phenomena like resurrection. Things like that just don't happen. What we know, we know on the basis of the evidence. It's called the scientific method. If you can't see it, touch it, weigh it, measure it, isn't true or real.

N.T. Wright says, "Worldview issues are at stake here and the resurrection cannot be dismissed as contrary to the 'current paradigm of reality'" (p. 69).

He is not the only scholar who concludes that the Enlightenment scientific method is not the only way to know truth. In fact, in one of the truly remarkable intellectual developments in our age, even the scientists today are pointing out the limits of their own method. Not long ago, it was

confidently predicted that we would soon know everything there is to know. There would be no more unknowns, no more mystery. Scientists don't talk like that anymore. There is much we don't know. There is mystery. There is truth about the world, the universe, and about human beings that is not adequately explained by empiricism and the scientific method, the "current paradigm of reality."

"I am convinced," Wright writes, "that the intellectual coup d'état by which the Enlightenment convinced so many that 'we know that dead people don't rise'—as though this was a modern discovery—goes hand in hand with the Enlightenment's other proposals, not the least that we have come of age, that God can be kicked upstairs, and that we can get on with running the world the way we want to" (p. 74).

Well, the twentieth century—the century when human beings, freed from the ignorance and superstition of the past, were free to come of age and be scientific, secular—turned out to be the bloodiest, most violent century in history. And God is not only not kicked upstairs but enjoying what can only be called a phenomenal comeback. More people than ever are interested in the question of God.

The scientists themselves are helping us see that there are plenty of reasons to acknowledge that the world is larger, reality is larger, truth is larger than anyone ever imagined.

Theology and religion itself became captive to the Enlightenment and the scientific method. Theology itself forgot that to talk about God is to talk about a reality greater even than human intellectual systems. Augustine said it centuries ago: "If you understand, then it isn't God." And William Placher, Presbyterian theologian at Wabash College, in a book with the intriguing title *The Domestication of Transcendence*, reminds his students and readers that a God who is perfectly understandable and conforms to the human intellect has been domesticated and is not the living God of the Bible.

What happens to religion when it capitulates to empiricism, the scientific method, is that it becomes a list of ideas to be affirmed—rational concepts about God and the world and the future. That's how most of us were raised in the faith: to believe that faith is understanding ideas about God and Jesus. And when you begin to question or doubt those ideas, the whole structure collapses and you are no longer a person of faith and you start heading for the church door.

That's what happened to Garrison Keillor sitting in the doubter's pew. Remember Thomas? What if religion is more than intellectual assent to ideas about God? What if faith is more than creeds and books of theology?

What if faith is the act of trusting God and following—in spite of the state of our current understanding?

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall thinks there is no more important issue before the church today than moving away from the definition of faith as believing ideas about God and Jesus to be true and toward redefining faith as trusting God and following Jesus, even when you're struggling with the ideas themselves.

Doubters are welcome. Doubters don't have to quit. Faith needs doubt to keep it honest—to keep it from arrogance and self-righteousness and fundamentalism. Suicide bombers have no doubts. Terrorists who fly airplanes into buildings shouting "God is great" are absolutely certain.

Doubt has a role to play in religion, certainly politics, certainly science. In fact the history of science is the story of men and women courageous enough to doubt the "current paradigm of reality." That's what Copernicus did when he hypothesized that the sun was not revolving around the earth—as everyone believed and the church said was and had to be the truth—but the opposite. Copernicus was astute enough not to publish his ideas during his lifetime. Galileo studied Copernicus, looked at the sun and moon and planets through his telescopes, concluded that the "current paradigm of reality" was wrong—the sun is instead the center of the solar system—published his ideas, was forced to recant, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

Science needs doubters. So does politics. So does religion.

Thomas was in the room when what he knew could not happen happened. The risen Christ returned. "Peace be with you, Thomas. Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and touch my side." And the most amazing thing happened. Thomas didn't do it. Thomas fell on his knees and confessed, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas moved from one way of knowing to another: a fuller, richer, deeper way of knowing; from a closed system based on evidence to a system with room for God. Thomas moved from a world defined narrowly, to a bigger—a much bigger—world.

Thomas moved in that moment from a world defined by death and death's finality to a world now defined by hope and by love.

"What Easter does," N.T. Wright says, "is open windows of the mind and heart to see what really, after all, might be possible in God's world" (p. 69).

Garrison Keillor is not the only one sitting in the doubter's chair. We all do —most of us, at least. To be alive and awake and thinking in these amazing times, in this amazing world, is to have certainties and absolutes questioned daily. To be alive spiritually is to think about and struggle with creeds and truth. Don't make the mistake of concluding that you can't be a follower of Jesus, can't be a Christian, that there is no place for you here if you doubt. Jesus did not say, "Here are ten good ideas about God." He said, "Be my disciples." There was no theological entrance exam for discipleship. He said simply, "Follow me. Be my man, my woman, my friend and disciple."

I love something the great Russian writer Dostoevsky said:

> I look upon myself as a child of the age, a child of unbelief and doubt: it is probable I shall remain so to my dying day. I have been tortured with longing to believe am so, indeed, even now: and the yearning grows stronger, the more cogent the intellectual difficulties that stand in the way. . . . And yet God sometimes sends me moments of complete serenity. It is in such moments that I have composed in my mind a profession of faith. (quoted by William Hamilton in *New Optimism*)

That's what happened to Thomas: a window opened, perhaps only briefly. But it was enough, and he fell to his knees and confessed, "My Lord and my God." Whatever the state of your soul this morning—however deeply you doubt—the invitation to you and me is to that same confession, in spite of doubts, unanswered questions: "My Lord and my God."

It prompts Jesus to say something about you and me all the way across twenty centuries—you and me with our struggles with belief, our doubts, our occasional moments of serenity and faith:

> "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Amen.